

# *Inspiring Figuratives for Artists*



## *Two Hundred Figuratives by Albert Arthur Allen*

Volume Eight

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## **Volume Eight: Two Hundred Figuratives by Albert Arthur Allen**

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*'In my photographic study, I have worked as direct as possible, eliminating retouching, double printing, or faking in any manner. It has been my endeavor to hold to true art in whatever medium I may employ ...'*

Albert Arthur Allen

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## Inspiring Figuratives for Artist series

The purpose of the *Inspiring Figurative for Artists* series is to provide study materials for artists who are trying to master the human form.

This book is about the *Figuratives* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American Albert Arthur Allen, commonly known as Arthur Allen. He was active as a Pictorialist photographer for about fifteen years, from 1915 to 1930, producing several hundred female Figuratives.

When you study the *Figuratives* produced by Arthur Allen you find an interest mix of Fine Art and commercial art. I find his Fine Art full of basic human decency and an honest portrayal of the female form. Allen's models are not professional models, but women who braved the world, sitting for him sometimes in their own homes, bedrooms or boudoirs.

Allen was a Naturalist in his Art, and found the modern and the real his inspiration. Towards the end of the 1920's some of his work was a bit too real. It was not merely that he did not hide away the source de vie or pubic hair of his models.

In fact it was the choice of the theme of some of his pictorials. He would be convicted on an obscenity charge when he did a series of *Figuratives* with male and female models, based on the Hollywood theme of a *Sheik* and his *Harem*.

This Sheik theme was very much out of Allen's typical Fine Art series. Perhaps at the time Allen hoped to cash in on the death of Rudolph Valentino, the film star who was famous for the silent films *The Sheik*, and *The Son of the Sheik*.

As outlined in the biography of Arthur Allen I suspect if he had stuck to Fine Art he would never have run afoul of the entrenched interests in Hollywood.

***Inspiring Figuratives for Artists*** is a series of books to help you with your *Figurative* artistic praxis. If you master the *Figurative* ... it is said you can master art. In each *Figurative* in this book look beyond the obvious and search for vanishing points, as well as form and function.

This book is the Eighth in the ***Inspiring Figuratives for Artists*** series brought to you by ***Atelier Press***.

Vancouver, 2024

## **Albert Arthur Allen (1886 – 1962)**

Albert Arthur Allen was born on May 8, 1886 in Grafton, Massachusetts. He was the third generation of Allens born in America.

He received a fine education in the literary and visual arts between 1892 to 1903, which included travel around the United States, visits to art museums, and the study of monuments of architecture. His early interest was wide and spanned science and both fine and applied arts including architecture. Allen would describe himself in these terms:

*“Aside from being a master of fine and applied arts, [I was] always been deeply interested in many branches of science – a student of electrical and mechanical engineering, physiology and chemistry, architecture and photography.”*

Allen traveled to and established himself in Oakland, California in 1907, where he founded the *Allen Art Studio*. In 1916 he would move to a better studio and in 1923 would establish an art school, *The Allen Institute of Fine and Applied Art*.

Allen is mostly remembered for his *Alo Studies*, which would find prominence in the 1920's to 1940's and then fade away after his death until their rediscovery and public showings in the 1980's.



The *Alo Studies* were a series of published photographic works. Beginning in 1923 Allen would publish three volumes of pictorial studies, which focused on the figurative. The *Alo Studies* would become widely popular until they ran afoul of the moral sensibilities of the time, resulting in his prosecution under morality laws. The first volume had no text.

The second volume had the following introduction:

*“In presenting the second volume of ‘Alo Studies,’ the artist has leaned toward the professional side, through a great demand from the artist and the student. It is hoped that this emphasis on the technical side has in no way lessened the value of the three studies for the layman who sees and appreciates that which is beautiful, for the sheer pleasure of gratifying his natural artistic sense.”*

The thirty-two images in this second volume, as well as those in the first volume, fit neatly into the Pictorialist period of photography. The Pictorialist sensibility was established in London at the Camera Club beginning in the 1890’s and continued for perhaps a half century. According to the 19<sup>th</sup> century British Pictorialist Peter Henry Emerson ‘the artist’s task was the imitation of the effect of the eye.’ Towards the end of his life Arthur Allen wrote that he himself was ‘... one of America’s foremost ... Pictorialists.’

Most of Allen’s Pictorialist works featured youthful nude females in nature, set amidst flowers, near or in the ocean, in front of windows and in studio

with artists. These images were many times in soft-focus and had such erotic titles as *Flower of the Dunes*, *The Forbidden Pool*, *He Loves Me ...*

Here is an example of one of his naturalist pictorials. It is possible to see the juxtaposition in it of the sensibilities of Ansel Adams and Edward Steichen.



**An Early Naturalist Pictorial by Allen**

In his third volume of *Alo Studies* he outlined an artistic sensibility:

*‘In my photographic study, I have worked as direct as possible, eliminating retouching, double printing, or faking in any manner. It has been my endeavor to hold to true art in whatever medium I may employ and the compositions in this collection are all worked in the out-of –doors ... many parts of the country are called upon, principally California, Nevada and Oregon, which abound in magnificent settings.’*

In this volume he dispensed with erotic titles and simply titled the images numerically. He also states the *Alo Studies* are “meant for art lovers, connoisseurs of art, for art students and for professional artists.” This statement was meant to address the growing criticism in that his photography was not artistic in nature.

While his *Alo Studies* was printed in limited editions and distributed in a select fashion to admirers and followings of his Pictorial art, a copy of each volume had ended up on the desk of the California State Attorney General who himself was not artistically inclined.

In the first of a number of court cases in, beginning in 1924 Allen would be charged with ‘sending obscene pictures through the mail.’ In a lengthy and costly legal process that span February 1924 to February 1927 Allen would be acquitted of the charge by a twelve person jury.

The California State Attorney General had tried to charge Allen with four distinct violations of the same crime by outlining four sets of postal destinations (Edmonton, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Chicago) but the judge decided it best to consolidate the four cases into one and try them concurrently, resulting in his lengthy trial and eventual acquittal.



**An Alo Studies Pictorial from the early 1920's**

It had worked in his favor that the third of the Alo Studies was titled *The Alo Studies and the Student Reference Works*. The written description of the purpose of the studies ... “meant for art lovers, connoisseurs of art, for art students and for professional artists.” Greatly aided in his defence. The jury deemed that his pictorials ‘were not obscene but were artistic in nature.’

From this court case would arise the legal principle that provided a study was described as “meant for art lovers, connoisseurs of art, for art students and for professional artists,” then pictorial Figuratives could be considered works of art and therefore offered protection as a form of artistic praxis.

Allen would also draw from his growing collection of figurative photographs to publish a collection titled *Female Form* in 1925, followed soon after by a fifteen photograph collection titled *The Model (Technical Edition)*.

It is worth noting that Allen undertook these two publications at the time he was entangled in the *Alo Studies* court case, which had found mention in the press and on radio. It seems he drew more income after the publicity surrounding his obscenity charge than before it. It also saw a quite public change to his persona. He became more defiant and disdaining of authority.

In a telling psychological twist, in his *The Model (Technical Edition)* Allen actually named many of his models and described their physical characteristics.

Here is an example:

Model Number – A  
Name: Grace Virginia Royce  
Age: 23  
Height: 5 ft, 6 ½ inches  
Weight: 130  
Neck: 13  
Chest: 32  
Bust: 34  
Waist: 26  
Hips: 36  
Thigh: 22 ½  
Knee: 15  
Calf: 15 ¼  
Ankle: 9 ¼  
Arm: 10  
Type: American  
Race: Caucasian  
Descent: French-Irish  
Sex: Female – Abnormal  
Sexine: Motherhood  
Pubic Hair: Growth – Medium.

There followed two further descriptions, one titled construction in which he describes the form of the models' physique, then a second section ...:

HABITS-LIFE: Irregular, governed by love and adventure. Fluctuating under the two extremes. Unusual physical development due to extreme out-of-doors life, along the timber line of the great north woods. Animated disposition with creative tendencies.

As one historian of the era has noted:

‘Such attempts to provide pseudo-scientific categorizations for the female figures were quite common among nude photographers of the period, but Allen seems to have taken the record-taking to an extreme. From a contemporary perspectives these “Typographical records,” as Allen called them, seem antithetical to his insistence that the images were Fine Art. Allen classifications for the last three categories, Sex, Sexine and Pubic Hair, requires elaboration.

In 1928 he would write the following about his Sex classification:

*‘I wish to call to your attention to three classifications – normal, subnormal and abnormal. I have chosen these three classifications as a rather formal way of designating the exact sexual vigor of each subject – I arrived at my definition after carefully studying specifically prepared questionnaires, which is the duty of each model to answer – for scientific use only. Across my Chart of Sexual Vigor I draw a horizontal line, which is marked Normal; if the data supplied on the questionnaire runs, only a fair average, classifications are charted*

*Normal; should such questions such as sexual desire, sex stimulation, sex tendency, run far above the midway point, the subject is charted as Abnormal; should the questions run far below the meridian the subject is classed Subnormal. The classification, though brief, may be found to have great latitude.'*

For the classification *Sexine*, a term Allen himself coined, he would write:

*"This classification must be accepted only on a scientific basis, all social standards eliminated. A girl may reach puberty, marry, divorce, and yet not bear young; she will still be classified a Virgin – because she has not borne young. On the other hand the girl may reach puberty, bear young without wedlock, or within wedlock, and be classified as Motherhood. This classification of Sexine is purely to classify who have borne young and who have not. It in no way links the habits or customs of any particular country. One of the chief reasons for so classifying is to trace the surface markings and construction of both types – Virgin and Motherhood."*

To interpret then Habits and lifestyle of the 23 year old model Grace Virginia Royce' she was neither vestal nor without child and her appetites were outside the norm ... What do viewers of his 'Fine Art' inevitably draw from these 'typographical records?' Imagine picking up a girlie magazine from our era and seeing such intimations. Would this be deemed 'Fine Art?'



One must wonder if his later legal troubles, and his eventual conviction under US obscenity laws, could have been avoided if he had dispensed with his last three categories; *Sex*, *Sexine* and *Pubic Hair* ...



**One of Allen's Naturalist Pictorials from 1926 (with no retouching)**

In the United States the depiction of *la source de vie* and the pubic hair on a female model was a controversial issue during the decades that Allen undertook and published his pictorial pieces (*La source de vie* is French for the source of life). He wasn't the only American artist of the age to run

afoul of this norm. Artists like Thomas Eakins ran into similar difficulties. It wasn't until the Sexual Revolution of the 1960's, and the proliferation of girlie magazines, before there was a drastic change to this norm in the US.

Pictorialists like Allen managed quite fairly up to a point at the time, when working within the norms. Several Pictorialists, Allen included, began by posing their models in such a way to avoid directly depicting *la source de vie* or their pubic hair. The female mystique was still left mysterious

Sometimes the model was without pubic hair (today some 60 % of women in their 20's and 30's make that choice). In this case the picture was retouched on either the negative, or blached out during the printing. Or the model was draped in such a fashion to hide away that which public norms said 'should not be seen.'

Yet, as we all know there was an underground trade of the illicit. One wonders if Allen at some time or other in his professional career he may have participated in both licit and illicit photography.

From the late 1920's Allen became a *Naturalist*, preferring not to re-touch what was, in his own words, "really there," presenting instead a sort of anthropological argument that he was undertaking scientific research. There were a number of like-minded European artists who preceded Arthur Allen.



**A 1920's Stratz Anthropological Pictorial for comparison**

The German quasi-anthropologist Dr. C. H. Stratz and his half-dozen books such as *The Beauty of a Woman*, comes to mind as does several of Stratz's contemporaries, who argued for naturalism in similar terms. Several German photographers were well known for their licit and illicit photography of the female form along an Arabesque or a Japanese theme.

By showing what was “really there,” Allen crossed a line in the United States and his Pictorials began to be considered *Erotica*. It was about this time that he also began to reject traditional notions of traditional beauty in photography. As one historian of his photographs outlined:

*‘This attitude would fit with Allen’s espousal of the ‘naturalist movement,’ which advanced a casual acceptance of nudity as natural for people with healthy minds. It is possible, even likely, that Allen’s models, willing to be subjected to such scrutiny of their anatomies, were members of the California naturalists.’*

Allen would go on to produce even more contentious works of Fine Art in his *Boudoir* and his *Sex Appeal* series.

In explaining his morality Allen would say that

*“...I have profoundly refrained from dwelling upon social moral or creed. My work is not theoretical, scientific or based on doctrines of other authorities. It is a simple and true summary of twenty years of observation and experience as an artist.”*

Next he produced a series titled *Exotic Nudes* of women from around the world. Up until this series all his Figuratives had been of Caucasian women. *Exotic Nudes* from 1928 included Japanese Geisha, Asian and African

beauties. They are pictorials of women with crossed legs sitting in front of wall hangings and tapestry.

Another of Allen's pictorial series from this time was titled *Nude Follies from 1928* and included several models who had previously sat for him. Some were five to six years older in their 1928 sittings. He made reference to their previous pictorials where he thought a compare and contrast could be made of the women.

Around this time he also started a movie picture company called *The Classic Motion Picture Corporation*. Then the following year the crash of 1929 occurred and in short order Allen and his many ventures would see him fall into bankruptcy. His actual financial problems began earlier in 1927 and would become progressively worse over the next few years. By 1929 Allen's debt was well over \$ 100,000 while his assets were a mere \$ 1,000.

One of the final series of Figuratives he would publish would be titled the *Premier Nudes* and would consist of nearly a hundred of his best Figuratives. While *Premier Nudes* was being prepared for publication Allen would once again be in court facing obscenity charges. This time he would be convicted. His arrogance in not abiding by the argument that his work was artistic ... as evidenced in his *Nudes Follies* ... would be his undoing.

Some of his more edgy pictorials take aim at the 'Fatty Arbuckle' Affair where the silent film actor's debauched lifestyle crossed path with the *Girl on the Red Swing* – a young burlesque performer. The girl haemorrhaged

out as doctors tried frantically to save her, removing her uterus in the aftermath of a Hollywood party turned orgy. The *Girl on the Red Swing* tragedy is Hollywood legal history. The tragedy ended Fatty Arbuckle's career and made him a convicted felon. He was convicted of statutory rape.



### **One of Allen's Edgy Sex Appeal Pictorials**

But Allen's greatest folly would be his images titled *The Sheik* in which he appears as himself. He was obviously hoping to draw on the public sentiment on the sudden death of the actor Rudolph Valentino, who had

played the role of a Sheik in two silent era Hollywood movies, one in 1921 (*The Sheik*) and a second in 1926 (*The Son of Sheik*). The Italian born actor Rudolph Valentino died suddenly in August 1926 at the age of thirty one.

Allen's *The Sheik* images appear to be taken on a movie set. These pictures by Allen was the last straw as far as the California State Attorney General was concerned. It was not merely the theme, nor the presence of a clothed man and naked woman, it was the depiction of a coital entanglement of a naked Sheik with a Caucasian woman which was considered obscene. Even in Valentino's Sheik films such an entanglement was an implicit and not an explicit part of the movie. Allen's era had not even publicly progressed to a screen kiss in the movies, let alone sex!

*The Sheik* also depicted 'White Slavery.' The theme of 'White Slavery' was a pulp fiction theme and considered lacking artistic merit in the 1920's. The same theme is still pretty much considered pulp fiction; as one can see in such films as *Harem* and the film *Paradise* from the early 1980's.

It is evident that powerful pressures were brought to focus on Allen and his Pictorials. Of the later obscenity charges, Allen was found innocent in one and guilty in the other. It was *The Sheik* pictorials that would be deemed obscene. Allen became a convicted felon, but was able to avoid jail time and paid a fine.

This was still an era where babies were made with the woman hidden away behind one side and the man on the other side of a *modesty blanket*. If you

don't know what a *modesty blanket* is let me tell you ... that I did not know what a *modesty blanket* was until my Catholic grandmother explained it to me when she was in her eighties and I was in my thirties. She gave birth to seven children all conceived through a small hole in a large one blanket – a modesty blanket.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was considered a sin for man and woman to enjoy each other during the act of procreation. From the pulpit across America this was reminded church-going film goings and became the impetus to the establishment of morality boards and film categorization.

After this trial Allen would cease any public figurative photography. Perhaps his public persona and creative spirit had been crushed by the ponderousness of the law. One must also wonder if the California State Attorney General stipulated to Allen that he would be prosecuted anew if he went back to producing more nude pictorials. Allen also had a great debt to pay off and it perhaps took decades to do this.

I find it hard to believe that he did not continue his photographic efforts in a new disguise, perhaps going underground, or perhaps taking up a studio across the border in Mexico such as at Tijuana. Throughout the 1930's to the late 1950's an underground industry of girlie magazines and Tijuana Bibles thrived in the United States. Some of the pictures that appear anonymously in these magazines show similarity to Allen's expressed style.



After his conviction, many of his public pictorials from 1916 to 1929 would be boxed and forgotten, in turn gathering dust. There was an underground market for his pictorials and it appears his style encouraged imitation by others, including some Pictorialists who would become well known in the 1950's and 1960's. I would argue that one of these Pictorialists who studied the *Figuratives* of Arthur Allen was Bunny Yeager, who would become an established Pictorialist and is infamous for making Betty Paige famous.

Allen died in near penury and in obscurity in Alameda California in January 1962 at the age of seventy five. For his times his *Figuratives* from 1916 to 1929 were very much at the edge. Today they seem tame. Much of the \$ 100,000 debt he had to dig himself out from under was from his failed film company. This took him perhaps three decades ... from 1920 to 1960.

It was in the 1980's, two decades after his death, that his *Figuratives* were rediscovered and appeared in several pictorial retrospectives. Interestingly it was his depiction as a Sheik that caught the attention of some journalists at the time. Perhaps the Allen retrospective showing was meant to coincide with the production and release of the films *Paradise* and *Harem*?

It will be left to the intrepid historian to perhaps answer the question was Allen's establishment of his movie picture company *The Classic Motion Picture Corporation* and his intention to make racy films in the style of *The Sheik* the endeavour that would lead to his eventual downfall. There is very little to go on to answer this question, but I suspect there is just enough ...



### **One of Allen's Sheik Pictorials**

It may have merely been the question who could get rich and benefit from Sheik Valentino's demise – the question who might profit from Hollywood.

After all in California ... Hollywood is all about the Chic!

## Colorized Indoor Figuratives by Allen

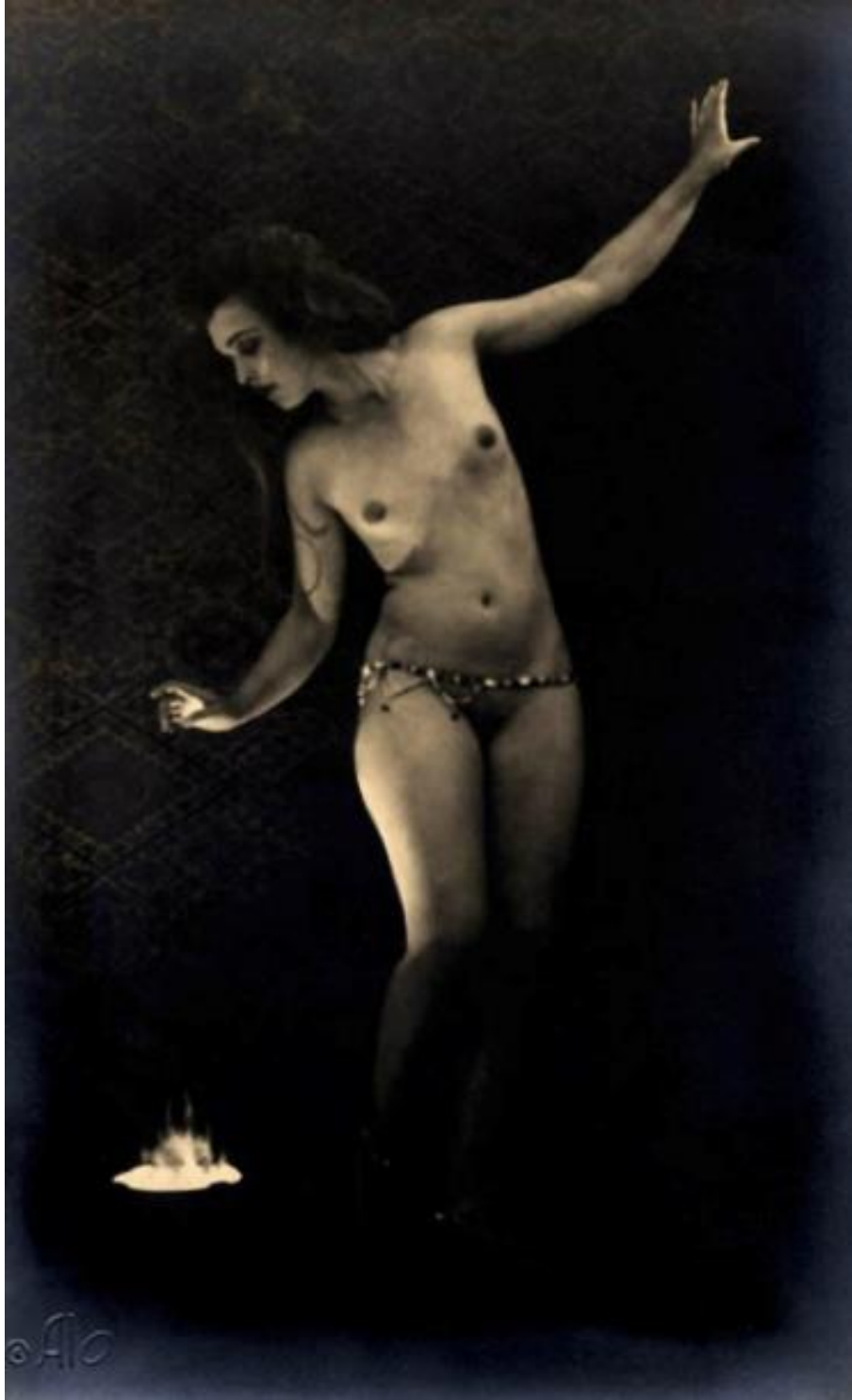




## Indoor Figuratives by Allen































































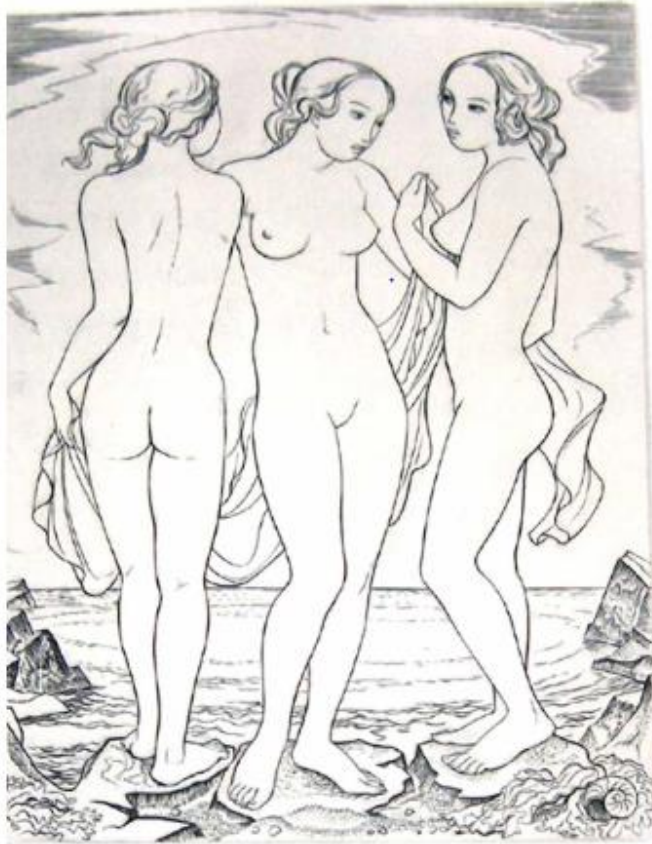
By Albert Arthur Allen

"HE LOVES ME"  
Copyright 1917





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## Allen's Boudoir Series























































































































































## Naturalist Figuratives by Allen

































































## Colorized Naturalist Pictorial by Allen





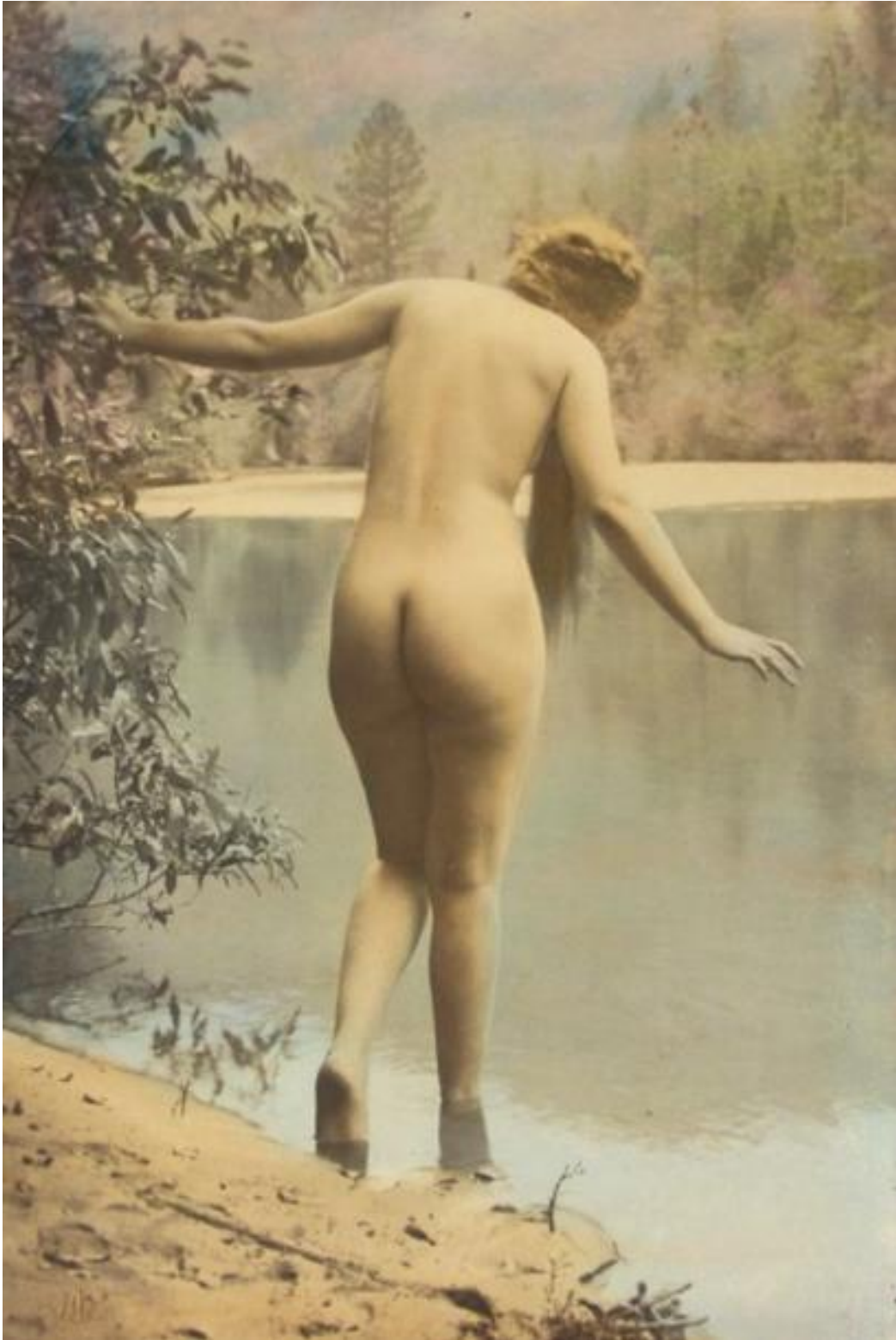














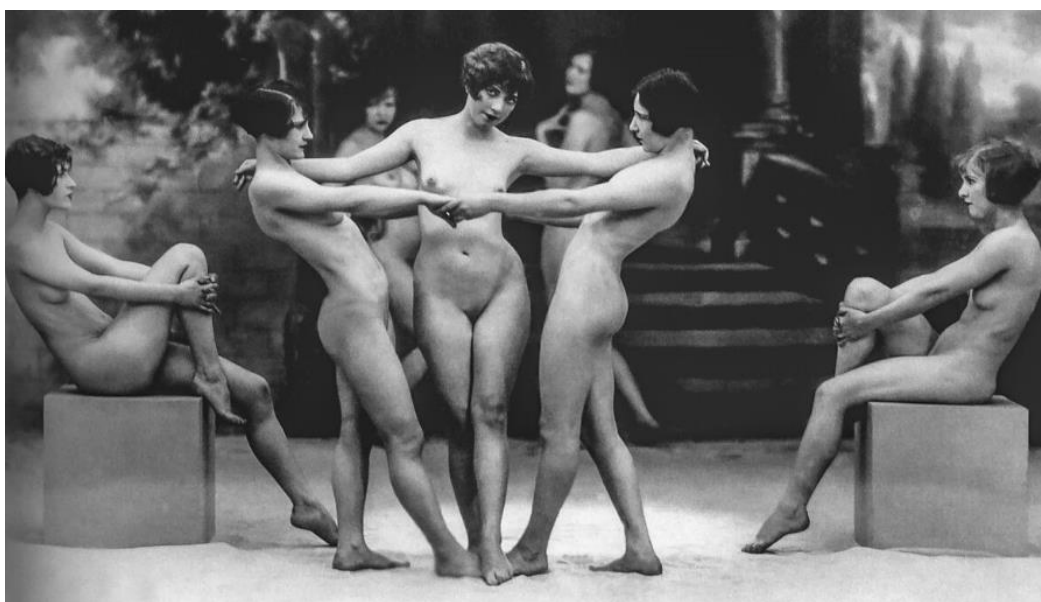


## Group Pictorials by Allen































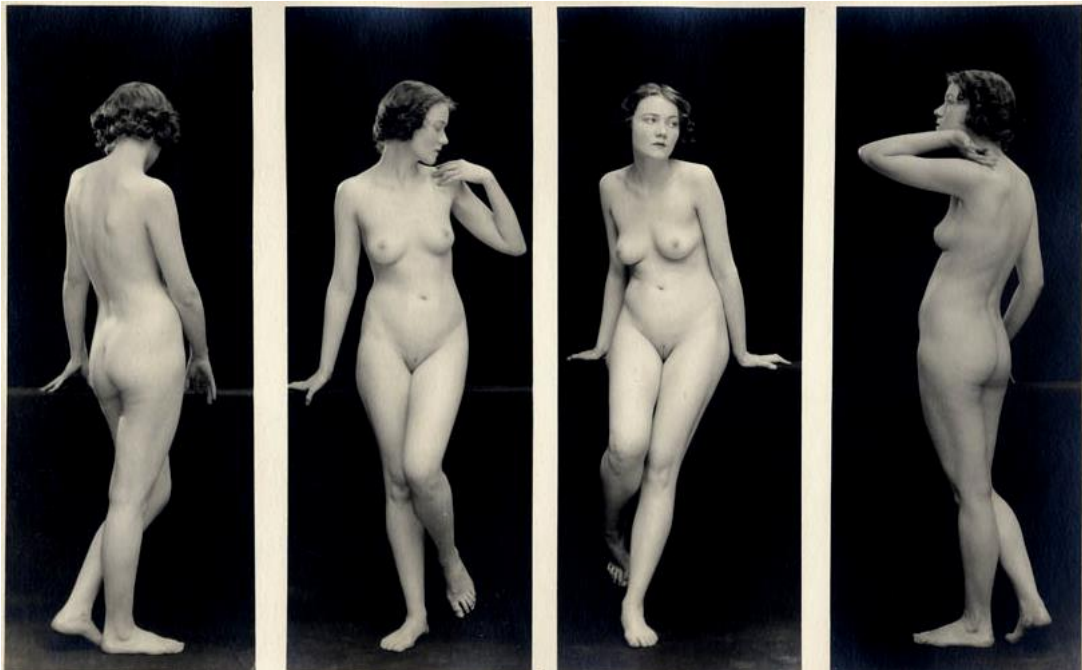


## The Female Form by Allen



























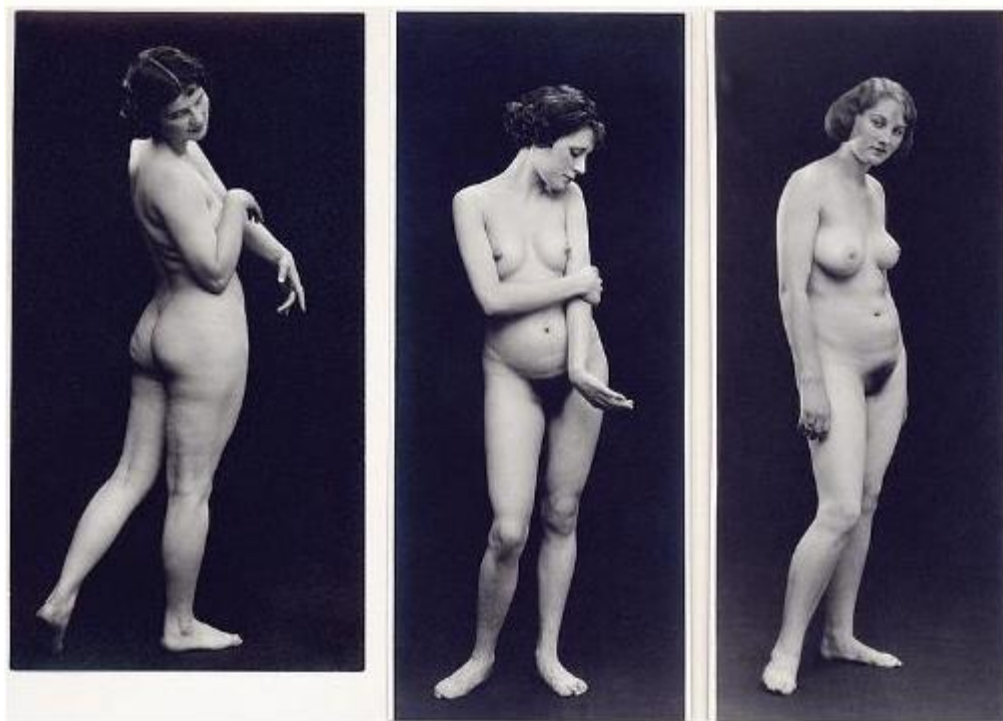
























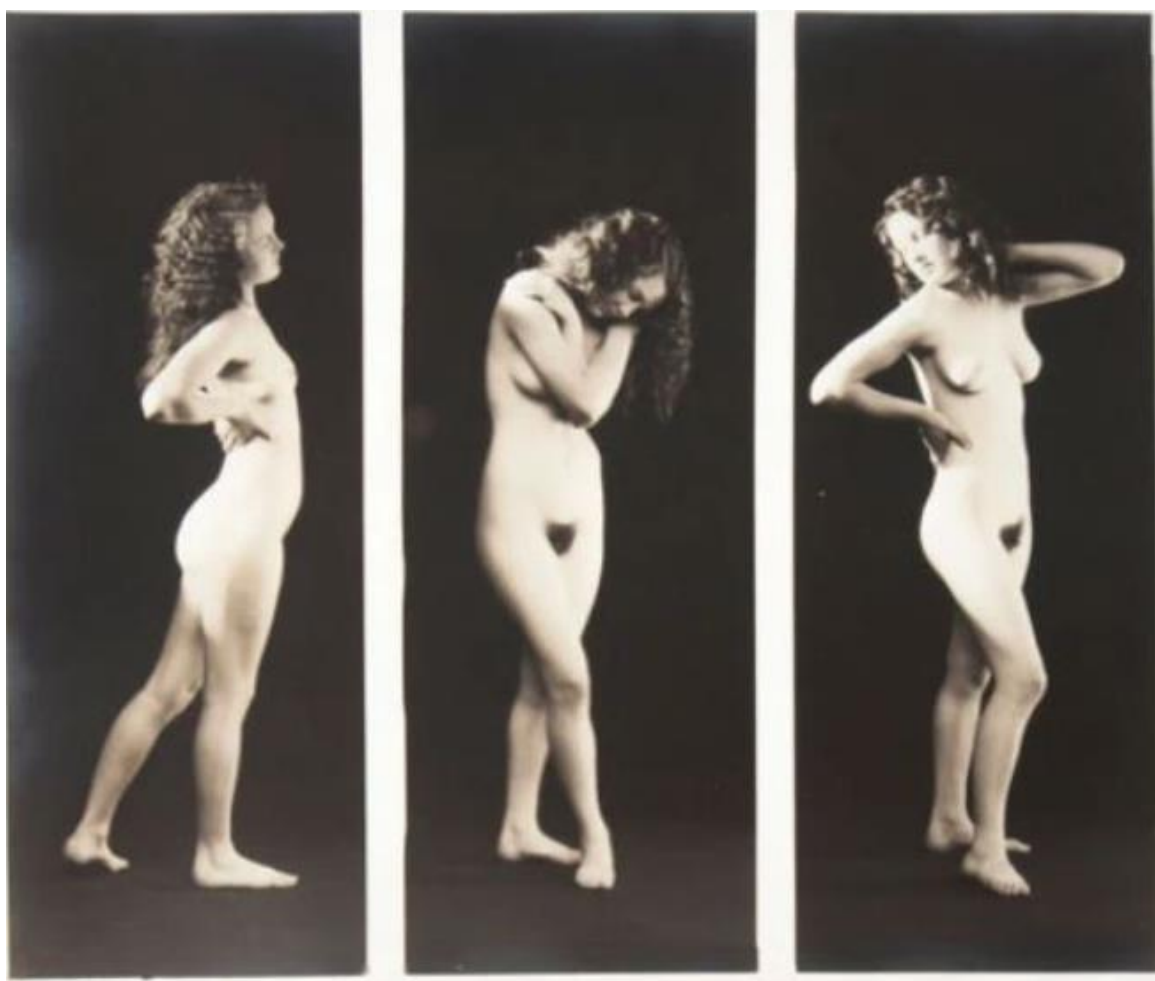












## The Sheik











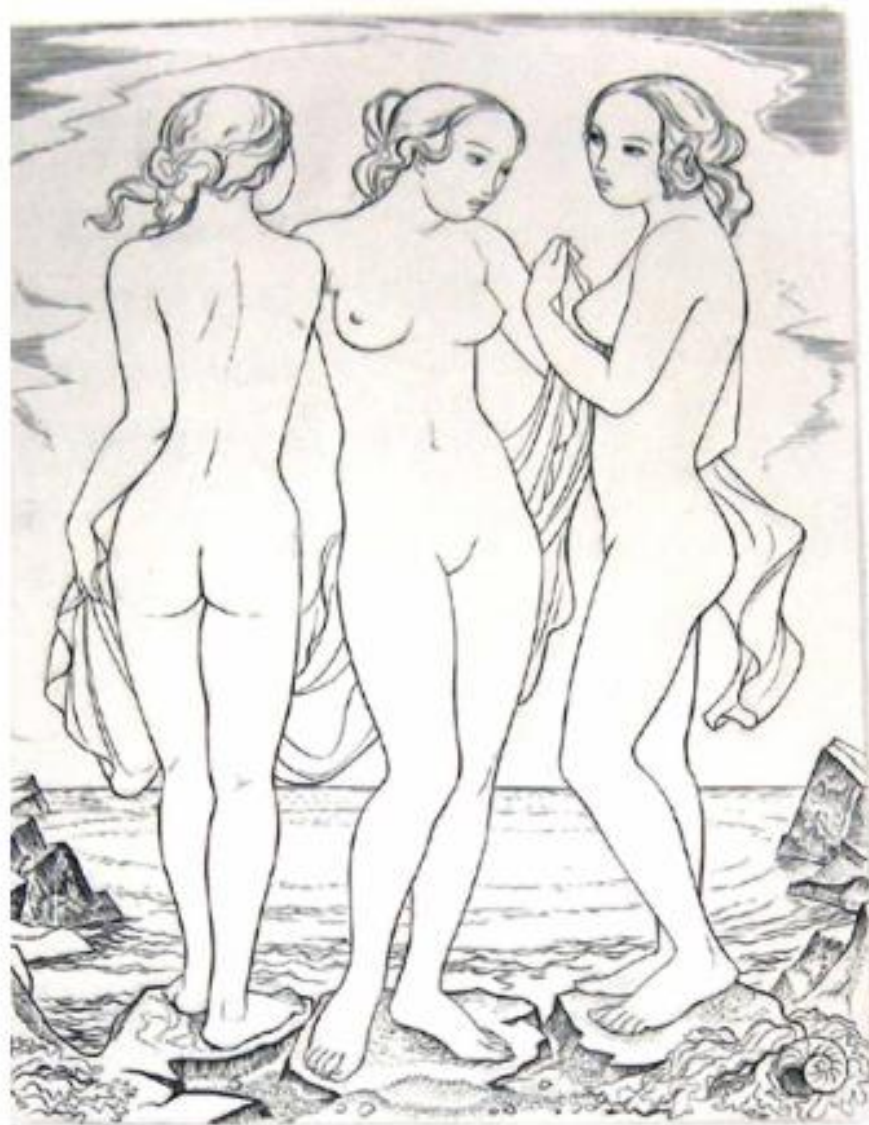












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